

POETICAL PARAPHRASE

ON THE

SPEECH OF DIOTIMA

IN THE

BANQUET OF PLATO

Canto I

Hard and uncommon is the task to prove,
That neither good nor beautiful is love;
And bold the bard, who strives in tuneful verse
Its wondrous end and nature to rehearse.
May Plato's spirit all he writes inspire,
And with Truth's splendour mix the Poet's fire.

Hear what Diotima, the Priestess, told
Of mighty love to Socrates of old:
Love, dæmon power! in ev'ry form resides,
And Nature's self in all her motions guides.
For ancient Order may attempt in vain
His empire free from ruin to maintain;
Unless the mighty power of Love is nigh,
And tempers ev'ry part in harmony.
Hence hostile elements, no longer fight,
But bound in measure, peaceably unite.
The cold and hot in perfect friendship join,
And moist and dry in firm embrace combine.
Imprison'd thus, the subtle force of heat
In vain aspires to gain its native seat;
And heavy parts of earth in vain may try
To break the league, and in the centre lie.
Confess'd his general sway, but well to know
The secret source from whence his actions flow;
With strict attention to my words attend,
And learn Love's nature and his wondrous end.
From deep reflection all my thoughts arise,
For deep reflection only makes us wise.

Can perfect swiftness to the swift aspire,
Or matchless strength superior strength desire?
Admitted, this conclusion must ensue,
That men the very good they share pursue.
The healthy hence must eager wish for health,
The fair for beauty, and the rich for wealth.
Possession hence with want would be the same,
And perfect bliss become an empty name.
Thus all desire, if rightly understood,

Tends not to present but to future good.
 And accurately analyz'd his frame,
 Love, with desire of good, appears the same.
 And hence we find he never can be blest,
 But in the want of something unpossesst.
 The distant good obtain'd, Love swiftly flies
 Desire no more, and with desire he dies.
 But think not hence, the sacred Priestess cry'd,
 That Love is only to the base ally'd:
 For as between the ignorant and wise,
 We find a certain middle nature lies;
 The lot of him, who justly can descry
 A thing exists, but cannot tell us why:
 (Since Science ne'er illuminates the mind,
 Unskill'd the proper principle to find;
 And ignorance from him must take her flight,
 Who never deviates from the path of right.)
 Such true opinion to the wise is seen,
 Betwixt the two a certain wond'rous mean;
 And such a middle nature Love must share,
 Not quite deform'd, nor yet completely fair.
 Hence bound to each extreme in magic chains,
 He o'er the world a mighty Dæmon reigns.
 For such the place to dæmon forms assign'd,
 Between the powers divine and human kind:
 In middle rank they fill the vacant space,
 And link the natures of the mental race.
 To these alone th'important charge is giv'n,
 To bring to earth the sacred will of Heav'n;
 And thence to Heav'n again without delay,
 Each prayer and pious off'ring to convey.
 Their power alone that influence can impart,
 Which gives success to the Diviner's art;
 In amicable junction they combine
 The human nature with the forms divine;
 In present danger, or when ills impend,
 The good from ev'ry evil they defend;
 Both night and day a constant watch they keep,
 Our living guardians `midst the death of sleep;
 And true to those they love with friendly zeal,
 In mystic dreams futurity reveal.
 But let attention for a while prevail,
 And patient listen to the following tale:
 Once on a time, 'twas on the important day
 When Venus rose all lovely from the sea;
 The Gods dispos'd to celebrate the hour,
 Which being gave to beauty's charming pow'r:
 To feastful mirth invited many a guest,
 And Plenty, far more welcome than the rest;
 Sprung from a father of illustrious fame,
 Renown'd of old, and Counsel is his name.
 The supper ended, Poverty came there,
 And humbly begg'd the large remains to share.
 With eager looks the heapy store she ey'd,

And pray'd each God her wants might be supply'd.
 Just at that instant, quite oppress'd with sleep,
 From drinking draughts of sparkling nectar deep,
 (For then unknown the generous strength of wine,
 Alike to mortals and the powers divine.)
 Intoxicated Plenty swiftly sought
 The beauteous gardens Jove himself had wrought
 There, stretch'd at ease, supine the feaster lay,
 Till all the fumes of nectar dy'd away.
 Mean time thro' want endu'd with prudent care,
 Him Poverty had mark'd, and follow'd there;
 And, conscious of her own extreme distress,
 Thro' love of Plenty sought the deep recess.
 Her time she watch'd, and quite o'erspent with grief,
 Fast by the side of Plenty sought relief.
 At length her woes the son of Counsel move,
 And as she wish'd she prov'd with child of Love.
 The reason hence, dear Socrates, is plain,
 Why Love is always found in Beauty's train;
 Since the same day that Venus blest the sight,
 Gave mighty Love to view the cheerful light.
 And hence with innate and with strong desire,
 To Beauty only all his thoughts aspire:
 In her alone he finds complete repose,
 A cure for grief, a charm for all his woes.
 For such thro' Poverty his abject state,
 Condemn'd to drink the dregs of Fortune's hate:
 Nor smooth his skin, nor yet his visage fair,
 But hard from constant want, and worn with care.
 No friendly roof protects his wretched head,
 No house he owns, nor for repose a bed;
 No shoes from rugged stones preserve his feet,
 And all his portion is the open street.
 But if we view him on his father's side,
 To ev'ry excellence he is ally'd. -
 From hence his love of gallantry proceeds,
 And all his fondness for heroic deeds;
 For full of courage and of active fire,
 No dangers fright him, and no labours tire.
 A sportsman hence, renown'd for speedy pace,
 And skill'd in all the toils of beauty's chace.
 To catch his game a thousand arts he tries,
 Which subtle wit or prudent thought supplies.
 From hence to deep philosophy inclin'd,
 Arises all his loftiness of mind.
 In magic, mighty, and sophistic wiles,
 By fraud or force he ev'ry heart beguiles.
 He is not mortal in the common way,
 Nor yet exempt from absolute decay;
 Like you and me he's not condemn'd to die,
 Nor is immortal like the Gods on high.
 In the same day a diff'rent state he shares,
 And lives or dies according as he fares.
 The rich abundance which he once partakes,

Steals hourly from him, and at length forsakes
 Like Euripus, his nature ebbs and flows,
 And want alternately and plenty knows.
 But view with wonder how his knowledge lies,
 For Love is neither ignorant nor wise.
 By deep investigation hence we find
 A middle state of wisdom Love's assign'd.
 Thro' this in times of old he rose to fame,
 And gain'd with ev'ry rank a mighty name;
 In form of sage philosophy appear'd,
 By Gods admir'd, and by mankind rever'd:
 For know, the powers supremely good and wise
 Can ne'er, O Socrates, philosophize;
 Nor to the ignorant and vulgar throng,
 The pleasing search of truth can e'er belong:
 For Folly, from the first created blind,
 For total darkness was alone design'd;
 And hence, by Jove's irrevocable doom,
 Is always cover'd with Oblivion's gloom.
 Yet she, though neither fair, nor good, nor wise,
 Affects these rare endowment to despise.
 The philosophic tribe from hence, 'tis clear,
 Can only in the middle rank appear;
 To Ignorance thro' matter's union ty'd
 To Wisdom by their mental part ally'd.
 The dæmon Love o'er these exalted reigns,
 Partakes their nature, and his sway maintains.
 And to the sources whence his being flows,
 His philosophic state of wisdom owes.
 His father Plenty, truly rich and wise,
 His nature with abundant good supplies.
 His mother, wholly ignorant and poor,
 Robs him of all his wealthy father's store.

Should any one demand of me or you,
 What is the general object we pursue;
 The goal to which eternally we tend,
 And of each restless wish the only end?
 (Tho' but a few can tell us where it lies,
 A chosen few, the fav'rites of the skies;)
 We might with safety, since with truth, proclaim,
 That to be happy is our constant aim.
 'Tis obvious hence that all men are in love,
 Since all to good as to their centre move.
 And hence that ardent longing which we find
 In each particular of human kind;
 That thirst for bliss, is ever understood,
 The love of real or apparent good.
 Love, mighty pow'r, in ev'ry bosom reigns,
 And thro' the world a boundless sway maintains.
 By secret stratagem all hearts assails,
 And o'er the strongest by his wiles prevails.
 Nor think his wide dominion is confin'd
 By any limits of a partial kind;

His num'rous votaries in diff'rent ways
 Their God pursue, and vindicate his praise.
 For some in Truth's delightful paths are found,
 Some are for riches or for strength renown'd:
 One general term alike to all extends,
 The same their motives, and the same their ends.

There is a saying which is held for true,
 That men themselves in what they love pursue;
 Their other half with strong concern inquire,
 And only union with their own desire.
 But my opinion, rightly understood,
 Is this:- that all we ever seek is good.
 This to obtain a thousand arts we try,
 For this we live, for this consent to die.
 With parts alone to which she is ally'd,
 The restless soul can ne'er be satisfy'd;
 For if diseas'd a member once we find,
 The hand contracted, or the eyes grown blind;
 The useless parts retain their empty name,
 But can no more our former fondness claim.
 Indeed the man, if such a man is known,
 Supremely blest with sovereign good his own;
 Will ne'er forget the treasure of his heart;
 Will ne'er from lasting love of good depart.
 But simple love of good is not the end
 To which alone with rapid course we tend:
 To full possession all our thoughts aspire,
 And this the purpose of each warm desire:
 Nor is possession yet the perfect whole,
 Sufficient fully to delight the soul.
 Duration endless must enjoyment wait,
 And place the good beyond the reach of fate.

Canto II

Of those who love the great the only care,
 Is to beget on what is good and fair.
 For know, O Socrates, that all mankind
 For generation are alike design'd;
 And when dispos'd, with store of vigorous seed,
 Corporeal forms or mental children breed.
 Of diff'rent natures, yet their end the same,
 The fair and beautiful is all their aim:
 Since each with ardent love to this aspires,
 And each indignant from the base retires.
 The work divine thro' ev'ry age shall last,
 Alike the future wonder as the past.
 For generation is the means assign'd
 To give immortal being to the Kind:
 The place of transient natures to supply,
 With other forms alike condemn'd to die;
 And thus in one eternal wond'rous round,

The dire dominions of the grave to bound.
 Hence like a river borne with downward force,
 Life urges on its never-ending course;
 Its vivid streams to Death's dark caverns glide,
 And in the waters of oblivion hide;
 But soon indignant their retreat forsake,
 And swift to upper light their course retake;
 Diffusing as they flow their copious store,
 In channels such as those they fill'd before.
 But view with wonder how the work proceeds,
 The male impregnates by his active seeds:
 The female form the fertile store receives,
 By nature passive; and from this conceives.
 In each appears a principle divine;
 In each the marks of perfect wisdom shine:
 But nought besides the beautiful and fair,
 Can with a principle divine compare;
 Can e'er its influence perfectly admit,
 Or e'er obedient to its power submit.
 Beauty alone with her celestial fires,
 Each seed enlivens, and each sex inspires.
 Hence when dispos'd the body or the mind,
 To stamp the image of its like we find;
 And with affection for some beauty teem,
 By far more dear than friendship or esteem:
 Approaching now the fair one's charming sight,
 It smiles benignant, full of strong delight;
 Each opening power diffuses wide its seeds,
 And thus alone urg'd on by rapture breeds.
 But when it meets with the deform'd and base,
 It starts indignant from its foul embrace;
 Contracted turns, and as it turns recedes;
 Nor teems with love, nor full of transport breeds:
 Its bursting power within itself restrains,
 And bears the burden, tho' it bears with pains.
 Hence generation in a wond'rous way,
 Preserves our being from complete decay:
 Th' immortal with the mortal nature joins,
 And death and life in friendly league combines.
 And hence you must confess, as truth requires,
 That Love to immortality aspires;
 To this alone that all its wishes tend,
 And only in its full fruition end.

But not to man alone is love confin'd;
 His power extends to life of ev'ry kind.
 Alike dispos'd, and full of fertile seed,
 All animals impatient pant to breed.
 Nor is their ardor less their young to tend,
 To guard from danger, and from want defend;
 These to protect they call forth all their might,
 And feeble natures with the strongest fight;
 These to support they cheerful yield to die,
 Their only aim their offspring to supply.

Thus endless being is the secret goal
 To which for ever tends this mighty whole;
 And generation is the means design'd
 To give duration endless to the kind.
 This is the stream which bears our lives away,
 And bounds the dreary empire of decay;
 Around its walls the rapid waters flow,
 And stop the progress of Creation's foe;
 Who but for this with all-destructive might,
 Would sink the world in Chaos and old Night.
 Hence tho' *Decay* dire devastation makes,
 When in the stream his baneful rout he takes;
 The rolling stream, resistless in its course,
 Fills the gap, and breaks the tyrant's force.
 Thus generation can alone supply
 Succeeding forms instead of those that die:
 'Tis this to each the seeming sameness gives,
 By which we say an individual lives.
 For tho' from early youth to late old age,
 We call a man the same in ev'ry stage;
 Yet from him all his substance gently glides,
 And nothing he has in him e'er abides.
 The former man is to be known no more,
 But, like a vapour, fled thro' ev'ry pore.
 Nor to his body is this change confin'd,
 But all diffusive reaches to the mind.
 Her hopes and fears incessant fade away,
 Nor can the same desire a moment stay.
 Some novel pleasures to the old succeed,
 And past opinions present new one breed.
 These thoughts a paradox perhaps you find,
 But a far greater yet remains behind.
 The knowledge which the soul at times acquires,
 Not only from her inmost cells retires:
 While other knowledge in its place accedes,
 The mind replenishing with Wisdom's seeds;
 But this to each particular applies,
 And the same truth alternate lives and dies.
 To man, I mean, appears to die away,
 For in itself it never knows decay.
 Whene'er this knowledge to departure tends,
 In Lethe's dark abyss at length it ends;
 But Meditation swift its course pursues,
 And straight its shadows in the soul renews.
 To the lethargic stream her flight she takes,
 And Memory from dormant pow'r awakes;
 Who on the margin of the gloomy deep,
 Would else be doom'd to everlasting sleep:
 Recalling speedy from the dreary shore,
 The images of truths she knew before.
 To soul then soaring on celestial wings,
 The faithless nymph with all her shades she brings.
 But immortality extends, you'll find,
 To each illustrious action of mankind:

With wond'rous love and fortitude supply'd,
 Thro' this Alcestis for her husband dy'd:
 Achilles hence, with matchless fury fir'd,
 Patroclus dead, revenge alone desir'd.
 By grief and love alternate rul'd he fought,
 And endless glory in destruction sought.
 Hence Codrus dy'd, to fix his children's claim,
 And fell the victim of parental fame.
 Virtue alone such strong desires could raise,
 And Virtue's own is everlasting praise.

But tho' immortal being is the goal
 To which incessant tends the human soul;
 Yet diff'rent men pursue a diff'rent fame,
 Their methods various, yet their end the same
 In some, and those the greatest part we find,
 Their power to body is alone confin'd:
 Such ardent court the favour of the fair,
 The vulgar kind of love their only care.
 But hope of endless being these inspires,
 And each thro' this to procreate desires;
 Their secret purpose to obtain renown,
 And in their children's being find their own.
 In other men of nobler rank we find
 This power is chiefly of the mental kind;
 Poets and artists of illustrious fame,
 By rare inventions such distinction claim:
 But far in beauty must the art excel,
 Divinely teaching how to govern well.
 Hence when some godlike mind from early youth
 Has teem'd with seeds of such exalted truth;
 Soon as advancing age matures the seed,
 In souls divine he seeks fair truth to breed.
 Some beauteous body first attracts his sight,
 And this he welcomes with sincere delight;
 But if in searching deeper he should find
 The brighter beauty of a virtuous mind;
 With fond attachment now and love divine,
 He teems for her in whom such charms combine:
 His only aim in virtue to improve
 The pleasing object of so pure a love.
 While thus dispos'd he tries the fair to teach,
 Deep is his sense, and eloquent his speech;
 By beauty fir'd, each pow'r enlarg'd he feels,
 And thro' his soul a novel transport steals;
 Till thus the seeds of wisdom in his mind;
 By sweeter discourse on virtue well refin'd,
 Spontaneous burst, and from confinement freed,
 A lovely race of mental children breed.
 His mind is now to such perfection grown,
 When present with his mistress or alone;
 And render'd so alert by frequent use,
 Her pow'rs with ease their copious store produce.
 And now the parents strive with mutual care

Their lasting fruits of true regard to rear:
 Since in an offspring of their souls they join,
 More fair than body, deathless and divine.
 Where is the man who Homer can admire,
 And not an issue such as his desire;
 Whose soul great Hesiod's noble theme can raise,
 And wishes not to share his endless praise:
 Or he who pants for high poetic fame,
 Such as attends the good Lycurgus' name;
 And ne'er desires like him to leave behind
 A race by far the bravest of mankind?
 Whose honours from the waste of time secure,
 From death exempt, for ever shall endure.
 Himself of such a race the mighty fire,
 For he alone such virtue could inspire.
 For Greece at large with matchless zeal they fought,
 And general freedom to their country brought.
 Amongst yourselves what well-deserv'd applause
 Is paid to Solon who begat the laws!
 And e'en in barbarous nations men are found
 Like these for virtuous progeny renown'd;
 But merely human offspring ne'er could claim
 Such boundless praise, such never-dying fame.

Thus far, perhaps, O Socrates, your mind
 From vulgar notions is by me refin'd;
 And well instructed what the cause to know,
 From whence love's actions as their fountain flow:
 But much, I fear, my efforts will be vain,
 Love's most sublime arcana to explain;
 Yet will I strive with unremitting zeal,
 What still remains mysterious to reveal.
 No vulgar height my muse aspiring soars,
 No path ignoble while she sings explores.
 Beyond the orbit of the moon she flies,
 And leaves the sun behind and starry skies:
 With daring wing pursues her rapid flight,
 Till boundless beauty burst upon her sight.
 Whoever enters on this great affair,
 Must first begin with bodies that are fair;
 If with success he e'er the work pursue,
 Or ever wishes beauty's self to view:
 Then if his dæmon lead his choice aright,
 In some fair female place his whole delight;
 Till teeming with a store of Wisdom's seeds,
 On her fine thoughts and fair discourse he breeds.
 Next he should think, if well dispos'd his mind,
 Beauty like this in other forms he'll find;
 Since many a fair his wond'ring eyes must strike,
 In outward charms to her he loves alike.
 Then if corporeal beauty he pursues,
 And as existing in the species views;
 Beauty the same in all he must conceive,
 And being universal thus perceive.

Whatever forms this lovely whole partake,
 He now admires for general beauty's sake:
 And all that transport which he felt before
 For one fair body, he will feel no more.
 If after this his soul, by wisdom taught,
 Has learn'd to value beauty as it ought;
 No more with sudden rapture he'll admire
 Corporeal beauty, or its sight desire;
 But far superior mind's perfections deem,
 And feel for body but a small esteem.
 On mental beauty, with supreme delight,
 He now employs his all-creative might;
 Researching deeper, too, his lab'ring mind,
 He strives some latent notions there to find;
 From dormant power recalls his fertile seeds,
 And big with thought, on his beloved breeds.
 His generous soul thus widening by degrees,
 Beauty congenial in the arts he sees:
 From art to science then he takes his flight,
 Beauty still beaming on his mental sight;
 Till thus revolving in his mind profound,
 That beauty various in them all is found;
 No longer like some mean domestic mind,
 To partial fondness for one child inclin'd;
 A slave illib'ral, whose contracted soul
 A part of beauty loves, and not the whole.
 But fond of what is fair in each degree,
 He views transported Beauty's ample sea;
 And thus begets, with vigour unconfi'd,
 All-various reasons of the noblest kind;
 With thoughts magnificent a beauteous race,
 From generous philosophy's embrace;
 Till thus his mind such wond'rous strength obtains,
 And such exalted views of beauty gains;
 The matchless science he at length descries,
 Within whose ample orb this beauty lies.
 Above the mighty sea sublimely soars,
 And, eagle-ey'd, its vast extent explores.
 But now with thought profound my words attend,
 And mark their noble, tho' mysterious, end.
 Whoe'er advancing then by fit degrees,
 Thus much of love thro' contemplation sees:
 Approaching now with rapturous delight,
 Near and more near to perfect beauty's sight;
 Sudden, while yet his thoughts their flight pursue,
 Beauty itself will burst upon his view:
 That very beauty which, with anxious thought,
 His restless soul in all her labours sought;
 Beauty transcendently sublime and fair,
 Beyond description, and without compare.
 Long[†] ere the sun arose to mortal sight,
 And Nature's face grew splendid with his light;

[†] This must be understood according to causal, but not temporal, priority.

Before the moon, by paler lustre known,
 On drowsy night with ray reflective shone;
 Before the stars with trembling fires appear'd,
 Or ancient Earth her lofty mountains rear'd;
 Or Ocean rising from his deeps profound,
 Bigirt with liquid grasp the solid ground:
 This beauty flourish'd by itself alone,
 The fairest offspring of the thrice unknown;
 Without beginning, and without decay,
 Thro' deep eternity diffus'd its ray.
 Whence all the beauty of the Gods arose,
 And whence the world itself for ever flows.
 For nought such matchless beauty can impair,
 Which always *is*, and is supremely fair;
 Unlike the passing forms of mortal frame,
 Which not a moment e'er abide the same.
 Nor is this beauty fair alone and bright,
 When view'd one way, or in one certain light;
 Such as the beauty which in nature shines,
 Whose ev'ry part according discord joins.
 No change of time this beauty can impair,
 Unlike the beauty of the cloudless air.
 Nor Heav'n's blue vault, nor æther's fiery glow,
 Unfading beauty such as this can know.
 No place peculiar beauty can confine,
 Like this unbounded, and like this divine;
 Such as in parts of mother earth prevails,
 Adorn'd with verdant hills and flow'ry vales,
 Imagination may attempt in vain,
 The form of beauty such as this to gain;
 In vain may vestigate her passive mind,
 Some object beautiful like this to find.
 No shape it owns, nor any mortal grace,
 Nor branching arms, nor mind-illum'd face.
 Nor is this beauty of a single kind,
 Reason particular, or partial mind;
 Nor in the forms of Nature it resides,
 Nor day reveals it, nor the darkness hides;
 Nor in the earth, nor in the heav'ns it reigns,
 No parts divide it, and no whole contains:
 But in the Good's bright vestibule retir'd,
 And by its solitary self inspir'd
 To sacred converse, single and alone,
 'Tis only to itself completely known:
 In essence simple, and without compare,
 No change can reach it, and no chance impair.
 All beauteous forms to this their beauty owe,
 And from its nature as their fountain flow;
 Yet while like streams they swiftly glide away,
 This wond'rous beauty never knows decay;
 Nor grows, nor dies, like those of mortal frame,
 Nor ever alters, but abides the same.
 When re-ascending by a vig'rous flight,
 A man begins to gain this beauty's sight:

If Love's right path he steadily pursue,
 His *end propos'd* will *nearly* rise to view.
 With love to some fair body first inclin'd,
 To many next, he then should soar to mind.
 From mind to art, from art to science rise,
 Till beauty's science he at length descries:
 Nor e'er in this ascent remit his flight,
 Till boundless beauty burst upon his sight.
 Here, dearest Socrates, alone resides
 The happy life, for ever here abides.
 Here is the only source of true delight,
 To live eternal in this beauty's sight;
 A glimpse of which, if ever you attain,
 Will prove the vulgar thoughts of beauty vain:
 The beautiful itself will not appear
 In costly robes, in youths or damsels fair;
 In burnish'd gold, or in the di'monds blaze,
 Or in the echoes of immortal praise:
 Tho' to the many phantoms such as these,
 Alone are beautiful, alone can please;
 Whose very presence such delight can give,
 With these they wish eternally to live;
 And such unreal beauties to secure,
 With patient mind the wants of life endure.
 If transport then arises from the view
 Of beauty such as vulgar souls pursue;
 Think of that boundless joy the mind conceives,
 Whose eye the *beautiful itself* perceives:
 In simple essence beaming on the sight,
 Not fair with figure, nor with colour bright.
 To souls refin'd, can such a life be seen
 Of little worth, contemptible or mean;
 Perceive you not, that he whose piercing eye
 Is able perfect beauty to descry,
 Thus, and thus only, fill'd with wisdom's seed,
 Virtue substantial can attain to breed?
 Till now become the fav'rite of the skies,
 Mature in virtue, and completely wise;
 His soul indignant leaves this frail abode,
 And reigns exalted 'midst the Gods a God.

